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CHURCH AND POLITICS IN DARK TIMES

Stephen J. Plant, *Taking Stock of Bonhoeffer: Studies in Biblical Interpretation and Ethics* (Farnham, Ashgate, 2014. £19.99. pp. xiv + 166. ISBN: 978-1-40-944106-9).

This collection brings together two decades of engagement with Bonhoeffer, both as man and as thinker. Plant freely acknowledges his subject's ambiguity, recognising that Luther's anti-Semitism and doctrine of church–state separation stymied the Protestant critique of Nazism yet not straightforwardly endorsing Bonhoeffer's part in resistance to Hitler. Was his willingness to step outside the law and ordinary morals in attempting to destroy a repulsive regime consistent with his presentation of government as a divine mandate equal to the church? Bonhoeffer grappled with such questions himself, and Plant speculates that, had he survived, he might have resigned his pastorate.

Most chapters focus on ethics and political theology with some deserving special mention. An instructive third chapter reviews the widely differing responses to Nazism by German Protestant theologians in a 1932 collection edited by Leopold Klotz. Chapter 10 assesses the possible influence on Bonhoeffer of Heidegger's turn to temporal being in the world, which is as such limited by other people and oriented to death. The first chapter, however, is the most striking and previously unpublished. Here Plant examines letters written by Bonhoeffer and by the military intelligence officer Helmuth von Moltke in order to contrast the approaches to Nazism adopted by Moltke's Kreisau Circle and the Canaris group, with which Bonhoeffer was linked. The discussions around Moltke focused on postwar reconstruction, both within Germany and across continental Europe, which was envisaged as a single state. The Canaris group, in contrast, sought to record war crimes and later to assassinate Hitler and seize power.

The Kreisau political manifesto was more appealing than Bonhoeffer's and ultimately prevailed. Moltke held the primary function of the state and economy to be to deliver political freedoms to all individuals. Bonhoeffer, in contrast, maintained that if Germany was to remain stable the restoration of liberal political freedoms would be impossible, advocating in their place an authoritarian constitutional state. This vision was abetted by his understanding of divine mandates as situating people inextricably within relationships of earthly authority. Even Plant acknowledges that this seems like 'listening to a voice from a different era' (p. 80). In Bonhoeffer's defence, in a situation where the army provided the only conceivable opposition to Hitler and the political stakes were huge, authoritarianism made some sense. Moreover, Germany was a young state with no democratic pedigree. But to offer such a defence is to acknowledge that, notwithstanding Bonhoeffer's witness to death, the importance of at least some of his political theology is primarily historical.

DAVID GRUMETT

School of Divinity, University of Edinburgh